

Preserving Indigenous Language is Necessary for the Conservation of the Great Lakes

By Amelia Jelic

Although the Great Lakes are a vast and seemingly infinite supply of surface freshwater, the region is not immune to an array of water problems. As someone who has lived in Ann Arbor my whole life, I have witnessed the pressing issues such as the water crisis in Flint, the 1,4-dioxane plume in Ann Arbor, and the harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie. There is no doubt that the big players in government ignorance, careless corporate operations, or big agriculture should be held accountable. But at their roots, these issues are a consequence of how we view water itself.

In general, we think of water as a resource, there mainly for us to buy, sell, or use. This commodification of water tends to cast a shadow on the fact that water is part of a complex system which connects all living things. Humans tend to take and take, not considering that we may be harming an entire ecosystem in the process. We must consider that when we threaten water quality with human activity, we are not only harming the ecosystem, but also ourselves. If we continue down this path of pollution and careless consumption, we are bound to lose the bountiful abundance of clean freshwater and pristine beauty of the Great Lakes that we hold so dear. Although it may seem separate from Great Lakes water issues, language is an incredibly important vehicle for gaining new perspectives. If we want to protect the lakes, we need to embrace a system of respect and care for the environment understood best by learning the language of those indigenous to the Great Lakes.

To gain care and respect for the Earth, we must adopt a system of responsibility and reciprocity. The basic idea of reciprocity is an exchange in which both parties benefit. This idea of equal exchange is so foundational to our everyday lives that it is thought of as a social norm or even a natural law. We apply this idea to our friendships, relationships, and businesses, but rarely to our environment. If the idea of reciprocity can easily be applied to our relationships with other human beings, why can't we apply it to our relationship with the natural world?

The Anishinaabeg is a group of people indigenous to the Great Lakes who have been practicing a system of reciprocity with nature for hundreds of years. As mentioned in Reo and Ogden's *Indigenous Perspectives on Invasive Species* (2017), the Anishinaabe concept of aki, which roughly translates to "earth," or the "sacredness of a place," holds that we are not separate from our natural environment, but rather an extension of it. Along with this comes the Anishinaabe concept of reciprocity: accepting the gifts that the land and water give us comes with a responsibility to that land and the system of beings it supports. While this idea may seem foreign, it is not so different from our own systems of reciprocity that we already have in place with other human beings. By learning from the Anishinaabe people and the language that they speak, we can begin to extend our previously established systems of reciprocity and gain greater responsibility for our environment which will lead to conservation and careful consumption of the resources that we need.

This extension of reciprocity must begin with giving indigenous people spaces to teach others what they know. The Anishinaabeg people have been living in the Great Lakes region long before the city of Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan, or the students ever arrived, and

we need to ensure that the people, their language, and their knowledge are not forgotten. Margaret Noodin, an Anishinaabe professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said in a visit to our classroom that the best way to truly understand indigenous perspectives, such as reciprocity with nature, is to directly learn the language they speak. Learning about indigenous language and culture on this campus should not be exclusive to multicultural lounges and museums; it should live and breathe throughout our education system. Instead of just bringing indigenous people into our space, we need to instead learn how to live in their space. By hiring more indigenous people and encouraging the teaching of more indigenous languages, the University of Michigan can make huge strides towards the preservation of our Great Lakes while enforcing the autonomy and legitimacy of those indigenous to the lands we occupy.

One worry is that because of the pressing nature of water issues in the Great Lakes, we will need a larger-scale effort than the one suggested above. My argument is that every movement must start somewhere, and that this movement for environmental reciprocity starts with language. Changing the way in which we talk about our environment can change how we think about it and address current issues, which is much more effective in the long term than looking for a quick fix that may fix the problem in the short term but would not lead to continual respect for our planet for centuries in the future.

While the Great Lakes have been an extremely useful source of surface freshwater for the midwestern U.S., human-induced water quality issues threaten the entire lake ecosystem, including the people that depend on the Great Lakes for water, important cultural sites, business, or recreation. Addressing a problem as large and wide-spread as this is not one that is quick nor easy, but one that begins by cultivating a language of reciprocity with the lakes through a resurgence of indigenous language. The Great Lakes region has always been my home, and that is why it is so important to allow the Anishinaabeg, who have lived in our home longer than any of us, to teach us how to see the world through the lens of a language where responsibility and reciprocity towards nature is not a choice, but a necessity.